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### More Than Skin Deep: Helderberg College—Lessons to Learn From a College In Transformation

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COURTESY HELDERBERG COLLEGE



# More Than Skin Deep

*Lessons to learn  
from a college in transformation*

By CHANTAL and GERALD KLINGBEIL

*So where should we go?*

It seemed like a simple enough question, but for a group of college students looking to do something off-campus in 1989 it was an awkward situation. Helderberg College, located in the beautiful Cape Province in South Africa, nestles on the side of Helderberg Mountain and commands a breathtaking view of the Indian Ocean. So a trip to the beach or a walk in the Helderberg Nature Reserve would be the natural choice for a Sabbath afternoon activity. However, we had a problem—we were a mixed student group—mostly White, with some Coloureds, a Black, and an Indian. Although apartheid was already on its deathbed, some things die hard. The signs on Strand Beach still proclaimed “Whites only.”

## **The South Africa of Apartheid**

For anyone born in South Africa after World War II apartheid was the all-encompassing paradigm of life, aimed at completely separating the different races and keeping them apart. It began officially in 1948 when the National Party won a decisive electoral victory in South Africa and began to enforce a policy of “apartness,” or apartheid, which had at its heart an ideology of White supremacy. The policy formally ended in 1994 following the first multiracial elections.

Racial segregation, of course, was not a new, South African invention. Racial segregation was a prominent feature even before the colonial era and was a reality in many parts of the world. However, apartheid as official policy, forming the basis for governing a nation, was something new. Legislation classified the population into four racial groups, including “Native” or “Black,” “White,” “Coloured” (or mixed), and “Asian” or “Indian.” Residential areas, education, medical care, beaches,



**Left to right:** THE WAY IT WAS: Claremont Union College as it appeared in 1917. It was a forerunner to Helderberg College. CLASS OF 2010: Members of the graduating class of 2010 pose for a group shot before leaving campus to serve in Christ's name. CAMPUS ICON: The Helderberg College church is a familiar site on campus.

and other public services were segregated. Beginning in 1970, Black people were deprived of their citizenship and legally became citizens of one of 10 tribal-based self-governing homelands. Movement of the Black population was limited as it required a special pass for finding employment in the cities. This meant that families were often separated when fathers left to work in the cities and wives and children had to live in the homelands because of the residential codes.

### **Helderberg College During Apartheid**

Something as all-encompassing as apartheid could not fail to make an impact on the Seventh-day Adventist Church. During the 1890s when Adventists began their mission in South Africa, society was already unofficially divided along racial lines.

Despite this social environment, the early Adventist pioneers and educators seemed to have had a broader initial vision than society at large. Records show that at least one Black student and several Coloured students were admitted to Claremont Union College, one of two forerunner educational institutions of Helderberg College, established in 1892. After this school was relocated to a more rural location and renamed Spion Kop College, students were also taught Zulu, one of the two most prominent native languages spoken in South Africa. Educators obviously had an eye to mission.<sup>1</sup>

Spion Kop College proved to be too rural and graduated only 32 students. A new home was needed for Seventh-day Adventist education in South Africa, and in 1928 Helderberg College opened its gates on the present ideally situated campus.

The college had a new home and a new college song. The song opened with the line "Hail Helderberg, the Light of Africa." This was a task that faculty and students took seriously. Prior to the outbreak of World War II Helderberg alumni were serving all over Africa.

With the application of international sanctions on South Africa, Helderberg College could no longer train and send missionaries to Africa. Without this mission focus movements in society and politics subtly became the governing norm for the college. Instead of the light to Africa, the school served only the small White South African Seventh-day Adventist community. Just how deeply the values of apartheid had become entrenched in the hearts and minds

of members becomes apparent in retrospect. When in the 1960s Alwyn du Preez, the first non-White student, was admitted to Helderberg College, he was not allowed to live on campus and could not use any of the college facilities other than the classrooms and library. He was also not permitted to attend the graduation ceremony or have his picture included among the pictures of his graduating class.

Many members and administrators probably believed that the strict apartheid laws gave them no other choice in the running of a college in South Africa. Just how far Helderberg College could legally go in modeling Christian brotherhood was never tested. The fact that there may well have been more choices to be leaders and not followers is demonstrated in the surprising interchange between Helderberg College and government education authorities. In 1971 Robert Hall, a Black student from the neighboring country of Zimbabwe, was permitted to complete his degree program at Helderberg College under the same conditions as du Preez. When applying for special permission to admit Hall, the college got the surprising affirmative answer as well as an explanation that "it was not, and never had been, government policy to interfere in the training of ministers by any denomination."<sup>2</sup>

By this time tremendous social changes were taking place in South Africa. Demonstrations and riots shook the foundation of the apartheid system. These social changes and the declining economic situation affected Helderberg College, and from 1972 there were tentative moves toward integrating Coloured students studying theology. The first Coloured students were admitted in 1974. They too were unable to board on campus, and were restricted to library and classrooms, but they were allowed to graduate with their class.

During the 1970s and 1980s apartheid was reinventing itself because of increasing internal and international pressures as well as economic difficulties. A tricameral parliament that permitted Coloured and Asian representation was formed in 1983, and the hated Pass laws were abolished in 1986. This was also the time of the worst political violence.

### **Real Change**

In February 1990 South African president F. W. de Klerk announced Nelson Mandela's release from prison, and the slow process of dismantling the official apartheid system began. On April 27, 1994, the first all-inclusive democratic



**Left to right:** STUDENT BODY: Students of Claremont College on an outing in 1917. MR. PRESIDENT: Paul Shongwe, president of Helderberg College, is the second Black to serve in that position. COMMUNITY OUTREACH: Students from Helderberg College visit this community as part of MFuleni Transforming Outreach.

elections were held in South Africa, with people of all races being able to vote.

In the midst of these tremendous changes the Theology Department of Bethel College (i.e., the Black Adventist college) was closed in 1991, and all theology students were transferred as full students to Helderberg College.

The memory of the long lines of people patiently waiting to vote for the first time in 1994 in that first all-race, inclusive election is still vivid. Since then, the country and the Seventh-day Adventist Church have made great strides, trying to transform long-established political, social, and economic realities.

Transformation has also moved Helderberg College. The integration of an ethnically diverse teaching staff became an important priority. In 2005 Gerald du Preez became the first Coloured president of the college, followed in 2010 by the appointment of Tankiso Letseli, the first Black president of Helderberg College. When Letseli received a call to be the new president of the Southern Africa Union Conference in early 2011, Paul Shongwe became the second Black president of Helderberg College.

Nearly 18 years after that first historic election, the college continues its process of transformation. Today it boasts a diverse international teaching staff in three faculties (arts, business studies, and theology). One of the challenges the college continues to face is the issue of ownership. It is trying to address the issue of acceptance by its diverse constituencies and the community through a new dynamic range of academic courses being offered to fulfill perceived needs. Enrollment is improving as the student body is closely reflecting the demographics of the country.

While providing quality education, Helderberg College is also serving as a dynamic role model for the coming together of institutions that have been developing sepa-

rately. While it is true that mind-sets and attitudes implanted over generations cannot be transformed overnight, Helderberg College is training Seventh-day Adventist young people to look beyond color and race and see people. The college is not endeavoring to be a cultural melting pot. Rather it sees itself, both staff and students, as sojourners on a journey of discovery that extends way beyond academics. Part of getting a Seventh-day Adventist education is learning to see and appreciate different cultures. It also involves a self-discovery as each person has the opportunity to better appreciate their positive aspects and become aware of their own cultural blind spots. Above all it involves a hands-on discovery of the power of God's love that can bind everyone in a common goal and mission.

### Lessons to Be Learned

Change is not happening just in South Africa. Change is a reality all over the world. What can Seventh-day Adventist institutions do as they find themselves in this sea of social change? What can we learn from Helderberg College's journey?

1. *Read the instructions first:* Many people don't read instructions. They feel that they know well enough what the product should be able to do, and simply launch into assembly. Often they are forced to later fish the instruction sheet out of the trash. Sometimes it's too late for repairs.

Jesus once told a similar story. It wasn't about instructions—it was about foundations. Remember the man who built a house on sand (Matt. 7:24-27)? Unfortunately, we all too often join the sand-foundation construction crew when our enthusiasm outstrips the quiet yet essential work of finding out what guidelines God has laid out for our institutions and enterprises. We need a sound theology and clear vision before launching into building or running a vegetarian restaurant, community center, publishing house, youth

group, elementary school, clinic, or university.

In Helderberg College's case leadership and laity would have been better grounded for making decisions during the apartheid era if they had questioned the then-current social trends and searched the Word of God and the detailed Spirit of Prophecy counsels for advice. If we are not actively trying to find God's will, we will naturally follow the flow. Society's currently acceptable ideology will become our own norm for operation.

2. *Be proactive—not reactive*: If we want to be proactive, we need to have a clear understanding of God's will for our lives. In fact, Jesus reminds us of our call to be "the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13).

In South Africa the Seventh-day Adventist Church was structurally divided along racial lines well before the formal introduction of apartheid in 1948 and mirrored to a large degree what was happening in society at that time.

Letseli puts it this way: "Do not wait for the environment to dictate to you, because you would be overtaken by events. Lead in terms of transformation. The world is changing. I believe our education should prepare us to be agents of change, instead of merely responding to change. People should be able to learn from us and see working models."

3. *Never forget our mission*: Being a Seventh-day Adventist or running a Seventh-day Adventist institution in certain political climates can be a delicate balancing act. Sometimes great tact and accommodation is needed to avoid having the work closed by taking a controversial stand. On the other hand, we do not want to end up preaching a different gospel out of fear of political or social repercussions.

The influence of leadership cannot be overestimated. Philip Wessels, a pioneer South African Seventh-day Adventist, wrote to Ellen White in 1893: "There is the colour line drawn which is very distinctly drawn here in society. For my part I do not care. I can shake hands with the coloured people and so forth. But our association with them is going to spoil our influence with others who are accustomed to these things. . . . To have any influence with the higher class of people, we must respect these differences."<sup>3</sup>

Wessels decided rather than taking a moral stand on racial equality he would retain at least outwardly the values of his surrounding culture in order to be able to reach a certain section of society with the gospel. Unfortunately, this leadership direction became the norm for the Seventh-day Adventist work in South Africa.

We are never to forget our mission to reach *all*. This will mean walking the fine line between alienating different groups or political entities. In some cases not speaking against some accepted cultural practice may mean speaking for it by our silence.

## Transformation Is Heart Business

Seventh-day Adventists understand that transformation is closely related to conversion. The unrighteous is declared righteous. The sinner becomes a child of God. The lost is found. It is a heart process. It's never just a policy decision because our minds must be renewed. Political systems come and go. Societal values keep changing. Selfishness, racial prejudice, pride, abuse, envy, and greed will simply find a new, more politically correct form of expression as social climates change. Transformation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is not a process that takes place by force, threat, or coercion. Gerald du Preez reminds us, "We have to realize that for each one of us, where we find ourselves in transformation, it has taken us a while to get there. Others had to be patient with us as we've moved to where we are. We have to extend the same patience to others."

During the 2007 graduation ceremony transformation caught up forcefully at Helderberg College. Alwyn du Preez and Robert Hall, who were never allowed to officially graduate, walked down the aisle of Anderson Hall and received their diplomas and a standing ovation—nearly 40 years after they had completed their degrees. A wrong had been made right publicly. Transformation had become tangible—and had brought together a new community.

Paul Shongwe, current president of Helderberg College, uses this helpful metaphor: "The closer we move to God the better we'll relate to each other. . . . God becomes the center." Biblical transformation is truly God-centered and involves a mind-set change. Ezekiel summarizes it powerfully: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (36:26). ■

<sup>1</sup> A handy summary of the early history of Helderberg College can be found in D. F. Neufeld, ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996), vol. 10, pp. 686-688.

<sup>2</sup> I. E. du Preez and Roy H. du Pre, *A Century of Good Hope: A History of the Good Hope Conference, Its Educational Institutions and Early Workers, 1893-1993* (East London: Western Research Group/Southern History Association, 1994), pp. 109-113. We have benefitted from reading Jeff Crocombe, "The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Southern Africa—Race Relations and Apartheid" (paper presented at Association of Seventh-day Adventist Historians meeting, Oakwood College, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Phillip Wessels to Ellen G. White, Jan. 14, 1893.



### Chantal and Gerald Klingbeil

write from Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A., where Gerald serves as an associate editor of *Adventist World* while Chantal is homeschooling their three daughters. Helderberg College has a special place in their hearts, as they first met on its campus and got married in South Africa. They still remember voting in that first all-inclusive election in 1994.